



IMPRINTS OF CONFLICT: Yael Bartana

Born in Israel, 1970. Lives and works in Amsterdam and Tel-Aviv.

After college, Yael Bartana left Israel for the United States and Europe, and returned years later, almost as an outsider, to the place of her birth. The distance she had gained made her see her country's cultures and rituals in a new and strange light. Her images reveal her perception of the thorough integration of nationalism and violence into the modern state of Israel, and she is keenly sensitive to the ways in which the trauma of the current conflict has imprinted itself on the customs, social identities, and even physical interactions of young Israelis, much as the Holocaust did on preceding generations. In 2000, Bartana began a video/photograph series that captures the holidays, recreational activities, and rituals of Israel's Jewish majority

in simply framed shots of landscapes and close-ups—often of teenagers' expressive faces and hands. Working from documentary-style footage, she assembles rhythmical edits, at times slowing the speed to create a lingering, transcendent effect. Many of her videos also draw audiences into the drama with droning or ethereal sounds. By focusing on moments in which individuals teeter on the edge of assimilation into a collective culture, the artist has developed a thoroughly humanistic point of view that searches for an existential meaning often lost in media reports on Israeli politics: "To me this is the concern of the eye society, a society of the eye that fails to see. I think it generates blindness and a lack of awareness to what is important and what is not; just stop for a minute and look at what's here."¹

After graduating from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, Bartana studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York, where she received her MFA. After a few years, she applied to the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam to study film. Her first project was the three-minute video installation *Profile* (2000). The protagonists are Israeli women soldiers who are standing in a line at target practice. Viewers can hear the gunfire when they put on headphones that mimic the earmuffs worn by the soldiers. Her more recent work continues to reflect poetically on nationalism as in *A Declaration* (2006), in which a young Israeli brings an olive tree in a row boat to replace an Israeli flag on an offshore island.

Installation is an important component of Bartana's projects, such as *Wild Seeds* (2005), a



Stills from *A Declaration* 2006 video (color, sound); 7:30 minutes Sound track: Daniel Meir

dual projection on two ten-foot-tall screens that features a color film of teenagers wrestling on one and the English subtitles of their Hebrew dialogue on the other. In *Wild Seeds*, a group of eighteen-year-olds plays a game they invented—"The Evacuation of Gilad's Colony." It starts with "settlers," who intertwine their limbs in a tight human knot. A few other players are the "soldiers," whose objective is to pull people away from the group, one by one. The subtitles of their conversation reveal, for those who don't speak Hebrew, the game's black humor. Their banter is flirtatious, but Bartana inserts a "third voice" into the subtitles that says such things as "We have a plan to conquer this land." and "Soldier, I love you." The ethereal voices of a woman's choir and lingering shots of arms and legs pulling and pushing give the film a mournful

and violent resonance. The nationalist anthem and playful anger of the teenagers prompt us to realize that this is a reenactment of the forceful removal of Jewish settlers by the Israeli army, in much the same way that other childhood games re-create historical tragedies (such as "Ring around the Rosie" or "Romans and the Christians"). Filmed in the stunning mountainous landscape of the Nofei Prat Settlement in the West Bank, the young men and women are actually dissidents who intend to dodge their country's mandatory draft. As one commentator has identified, they are "wild seeds" in the context of Genesis 26:3–4 and its promise of the holy land to the Jewish people: "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath

which I swear unto Abraham thy father; And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."²

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1. Yael Bartana, interview with Galit Eilat, in *Yael Bartana Videos & Photographs*, Charles Esche and Esra Sarigedik Oktem, eds. (Eindhoven, the Netherlands: Van Abbemuseum; Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers/Gijs Stork, 2006), 41.

2. See Charles Esche, "Yael Bartana," in *9th International Istanbul Biennial*, exh. cat. (Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2005), 215.